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Lent 5

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Big Dreams or A Better Reality?”

Text: Luke 20:9-20 (Philippians 3:4b-14; Isaiah 43:16-21)

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

The workers in the vineyard had a dream: that one day, they would own their own vineyard. They wouldn't have to work for someone else and give away a percentage of the fruit they'd worked so hard to produce. They'd have workers working for them. They'd be the ones getting the harvest. They'd have the easy life.

But it wasn't working out quite as they expected. Vineyards were expensive and it was hard saving money. They had been able to save a little, but at this rate, they would never own their own vineyard. They'd be workers forever. And as they thought about that, their work became less satisfying. They grew bitter. And so, perhaps, they started hatching alternate plans . . . to increase their profit. The owner didn't need such a big cut! He was already rich. So they began, perhaps, to cook the books, tilt things in their favor.

But still, even with that, things were progressing far too slowly. And bitterness turned to anger which turned to hatred . . . and then the thought that why shouldn't *this* vineyard be theirs? They did all the work. They'd made the owner a wealthy man. It was their turn. So that year, when the owner sent his servants to collect his share, there'd be no fruit - they beat them and treated them shamefully. After the first couple, they even started to kind of enjoy it - *sticking it to the man!*

Until one day, it was no servant who showed up, but the owner's son! But the workers had grown so callous and hard that there was no fear in them at seeing the son - their greedy eyes saw instead the very thing that could make their dreams come true. *They would kill the son.* That way, when the owner died without an heir, the vineyard would be theirs! They'd finally have what they wanted all along . . .

But their dream would not come true. Their fantasy would be shattered when the owner of the vineyard came home and not only took away the vineyard from them, but took their very lives. There was no happily ever after to this parable - for the workers, the owner, or the son. Which produced the response: *Surely not!* May it never be, such a sad story . . .

But it was the story that was being played out in Jerusalem. ***The scribes and the chief priests sought to lay hands on him*** - the Son! - ***at that very hour, for they perceived that he had told this parable against them***. And they were right. Like so many that had come before them, they had used their leadership in God's Church, God's vineyard, for their own gain; to create their own business. Their goal and focus was no longer to proclaim God's Word and make His people rich in the forgiveness of their sins, but to make themselves rich, with the things of this world and life - to have comfortable lives, enjoy the adoration of the people, have positions of honor, and be the ones in charge.

And it was working out quite nicely . . . until Jesus came along. God had sent prophets before this, and now His Son, calling on them to produce the fruits of repentance and faith. But there would be no such fruit. That wasn't in their plans. They would cling to their dreams and try to keep what they had . . . even if it meant killing the Son.

And maybe your response to that is the same as the people back then: ***Surely not!*** Surely they weren't *that* bad. But that's what can happen when dreams take over; when our dreams become false gods. What starts out innocently can turn deadly.

As it had for those Jewish leaders. Selling sacrificial animals for traveling pilgrims stopped being a service and became big business. The money exchange in the Temple became less about exchange and more about profit. Comfort, honor, privilege, and power began to dictate how things were done instead of God and His Word. ***Give all that up? Surely not!*** the chief priests and scribes replied in their thoughts and desires and words . . . and then, ultimately, in their deeds.

Jesus would have to go. The Son would have to be killed.

But here's where the parable takes an unexpected turn: God turns the evil for good. ***The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone***. The killing of the Son isn't the end of the story. God uses the evil of the tenants for the good of the world; the evil of the Jewish leaders for the salvation of all men. By throwing Jesus out and planting the crucified and dead Son of God into the ground, the Jewish leaders were not, in fact, cementing the kingdom for themselves, but **unknowingly laying the cornerstone of a new kingdom**. Not their own, but God's. Not one of this world, but one for eternity.

Isaiah had prophesied it, predicted it, when he spoke for God: ***Behold, I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?*** A new thing. Something never done before. Something man cannot even imagine. A springing forth from the dead. A triumph over death and the sin that causes it. And so a new life, beyond the reach of sin and death. A new life of plenty, praise, and peace.

But they didn't perceive it. Their hearts had grown too calloused and hard, too focused on and captivated with the things of this world and what they could get here and now. And

so Jesus adds to what He said about this new cornerstone: *Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces, and when it falls on anyone, it will crush him.*

The tenants in the parable were fallen upon and crushed. Destroyed. *But there's another option: to (instead) fall on that stone and be broken.* To have our efforts and kingdoms broken, and so be rebuilt anew. On a new cornerstone. On the cornerstone. On Christ.

It's what happened to Paul. What a life he had built for himself! And a very good looking, religious one at that. He was, as he described it, one of the most learned Pharisees, one of the most zealous church persecutors, one of the most precise law keepers - but it was a life built on the wrong cornerstone. And so Jesus came to him, felled him off his horse, and broke him, in order to give him a new life. To rebuild his life on Christ crucified; on that cornerstone.

And once Paul's eyes were opened, all that he had before thought so valuable, so praiseworthy, such a great achievement, his dreams and all the effort he had put in to accomplish them, he said all that was now *rubbish*. Garbage. The **glory** of Jesus' resurrection greater than any glory Paul might have or achieve. The **power** of Jesus' resurrection greater than any power Paul might have or achieve. The **life** of Jesus' resurrection greater than any life Paul might have or achieve. That's all that mattered to him now. He had been transformed by the stone he once rejected.

Which then brings us to today, and you and me. Even we as a Church. We have dreams, too. When we're little, we often have *big* dreams of what we will do, what we will become. An astronaut or an olympian. When we get a little older, we get a bit more realistic, but still have dreams of what could be. And then when we hit the twilight of our lives, maybe the dreams become fewer but the regrets more; dreams of what *could* have been.

And dreams aren't wrong or bad. Sometimes dreams come true. After all, some people do become astronauts and olympians, famous artists and presidents. The danger - as it was in Jesus' day - is when our dreams take over, dominate our hearts, determine our priorities, blind us and bind us . . . or in short, *when our dreams become false gods*. When the sin that lives in us so easily turns good to evil. When what starts out innocently turns deadly. When the pursuit of our dreams chokes out and kills the life given us by Christ. Or when dreams that didn't come true make us bitter or angry and hostile toward God. When our dreams or their memories take over our hearts and push Christ out. **Surely not!** we say. But church membership rolls are often filled with the names of people for whom the dreams and things of this world and life have taken over and killed the Son. Maybe you can even see it in yourself and feel the tug, feel the conflict, and see the beginning of the hostile takeover of your heart . . . *What is it for you? Do you have things in your heart - call them dreams or not - that need to be felled before they fell you? And a new cornerstone, perhaps, put in place?*

Those are tough words. And tough to realize that our dreams sometimes wind up as nightmares . . . if they pull us away from Christ. So better to stumble and fall now than be crushed in the end. Better to turn and repent now than to be cast out forever. For those broken now have the promise of healing, of life, of forgiveness. The promise of a God who turns evil for good. The promise of a transformation, a re-formation, of our hearts, minds, dreams, and desires now, and a transformation, *a resurrection* to a completely new life in the end. For God desires not our deaths, but that we turn to Him and live (Ezekiel 18:23).

And so still today He sends His Son, into the vineyard. To us, you and me today. But *unlike* the parable, for us today - those who live *after* the Son was cast out and killed - for us today He comes as the resurrected One, to **first** give us **the fruits of His work**: the forgiveness He won on the cross, His victory over death and the grave, and the Body and Blood that hung from the cross. And through these to transform us and raise us with Himself to a new life. To give us His share of the kingdom and build us on Himself as the cornerstone.

Which might mean being felled a time or two, when we start reverting to our old ways and building wrong again; when our dreams and desires threaten to take over again. And it might mean transforming our dreams, too. That maybe God use us to serve our neighbors in ways that we had never imagined . . . but which are maybe even better. And so in ways ever new and maybe even surprising, producing wonderful fruits of faith. Not that we did it, but because of Christ and His life, given to us. Because of Christ, the Son who gave Himself to save tenants like us.

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.